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A
NEW
ULSTER



Featuring the works of Strider Marcus Jones, Michael McAloran, Matthew Duggan, Allison Grayhurst, Pijush Kanti Deb, John Doyle, Steve Klepetar, Peter O'Neill, Mel Waldman and Rachel Sutcliffe. Hard copies can be purchased from our website.

Issue No 35
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A New Ulster
On the Wall
Website

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Editor: Arizahn
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A New Ulster

Manuscripts, art work and letters to be sent to:

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“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” Aristotle.

Editorial

Welcome to the August issue of A New Ulster we present to you dear reader a vast range of work including poetry transversions and an exclusive extract from the novella Project Nightingale. Each issue is a celebration of poetry and prose a gift which reaches globally. We have a strong selection of poetry and prose I firmly believe that there is something for everyone in this issue.

I've been embracing my creative side a lot more recently and spent several months working on a canvas the resultant painting was sold at an auction and helped raise money for Marie Curie, I've also been working on my poetry and planning out the next few issues covers.

I'm not sure about where you live but the weather here has been changeable at best and miserable at worst. My advice is just keep on working write, draw or paint for yourself the audience is often secondary and is a pleasant surprise for when you get recognized for your efforts. Don't be afraid to experiment either or to step beyond your comfort zone. I'm pleased to say that my father is on the mend after a very serious illness I thank everyone who has wished him a speedy recovery.

I hope you get as much enjoyment reading these pieces they speak highly of the artists who submitted to this issue and as I've often quipped they show the Artist as God and allow us to step into a world of dreams and hopes, yes for a brief moment we can walk different lands.

Enough pre-amble! Onto the creativity!

Amos Greig

Biographical Note: Strider Marcus Jones

Strider Marcus Jones – is a poet, law graduate and ex civil servant from Salford/Hinckley, England with proud Celtic roots in Ireland and Wales. A member of The Poetry Society, his five published books of poetry are modern, traditional, mythical, sometimes erotic, surreal and metaphysical <http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/stridermarcusjones1>. He is a maverick, moving between forests, mountains and cities, playing his saxophone and clarinet in warm solitude.

His poetry has been accepted for publication in 2015 by mgv2 Publishing Anthology; Earl Of Plaid Literary Journal 3rd Edition; Subterranean Blue Poetry Magazine; Deep Water Literary Journal, 2015-Issue 1; Kool Kids Press Poetry Journal; Page-A-Day Poetry Anthology 2015; Eccolinguistics Issue 3.2 January 2015; The Collapsed Lexicon Poetry Anthology 2015 and Catweazle Magazine Issue 8; Life and Legends Magazine; The Stray Branch Literary Magazine; Amomancies Poetry Magazine; The Art Of Being Human Poetry Magazine; Cahaba River Literary Journal; East Coast Literary Review; Nightchaser Ink Publishing Anthology - Autumn Reign; Crack The Spine Literary Magazine; A New Ulster/Anu Issue 27/29/31/32/33/34; Poems For A Liminal Age Anthology; In The Trenches Poetry Anthology; Blue Lines Literary Journal, Spring 2015; Murmur Journal, April 2015; PunksWritePoemsPress-Rogue Poetry; Outburst Poetry Magazine; The Galway Review; The Honest Ulsterman Magazine; Writing Raw Poetry Magazine; The Lonely Crowd Magazine; Section8Magazine; Danse Macabre Literary Magazine; The Lampeter Review; Coda Crab Books-Anthology-Peace:Give It A Chance; Clockwork Gnome:Quantum Fairy Tales; Ygdrasil, A Journal of the Poetic Arts, May 2015 Issue and Don't Be Afraid: Anthology To Seamus Heaney.

LOVE IS, ALL IS
(Strider Marcus Jones)

love is,
all is-
light and dark,
shade and shadow,
high-low
wide-narrow
crater under rainbow.
tramp or truffle you chance to meet
and take your time to share and eat;
a mythical ark
in-out skylark,
so fluttery butterfly in buddleia stomach
that wakes you up
more muttery in your head-
with jade of jealousy
and truest thread
come concave and convex,
mirrored and mouthed in images and text
with-without key,
but only borrowed
today and tomorrowed
and after that, what will be-
something ethereal
deaths' music can't serial,
alone, then together
in its own weather
sensual and free.

HERE I AM THE SAME
(Strider Marcus Jones)

here i am the same
sitting in the dark with you
turning out the stars
that won't do.
from the dimmed grain
light of coffee bars
they look so infinitely plain
against the black backdrop
countless where time can't stop.

once,
everyone has a once-
they lit the canopy
on that journey
now only
tickets of buses and trains
and notes that grew out of numbers and names.

around midnight,
i mull them with moonlight
and stand out in their youth
from this heavy slated roof
i've settled under
and wonder
will i ever find
another time to penetrate
and fascinate
your body with my mind.

AN OLD WELL
(Strider Marcus Jones)

an old well,
closely clustered
with the detritus of age
doesn't tell-
who has whispered
or gazed
into it's wise abyss
to consummate a coveted wish.
it doesn't judge
or smudge
the beauty that is spoken
when those lips
fall open
to it's thoughts and quiet quips-
that thread, is never broken
or it's bed
shed
in these silent seasons,
that have their reasons
for waiting to be told-
so don't lie down
or feelings fold
in sadness, like a clown
who hesitates
with the wanders of fates-
white gold
doesn't rust
in the trial and trust
of the truth it makes.

HERE I AM

(Strider Marcus Jones)

here i am
in some lost
where i'll be looking for you later
in the frost
of your cyan
that was equator
fabulously been
with a dram and cloves of evergreen
aromatic branches
roaming through your thoughts ranches-
not to turn the pigments and phonetics
of it back
or absorb blank ammunitions hits
defending your attack
of made up words
from stunning me like wading birds
stuck in your muddy vellum
of cerubellum-
no not for that
but just to mean
the wound is clean
of abstract probabilities
adorning geometric cities.

A WOMAN DOES NOT HAVE TO WAIT
(Strider Marcus Jones)

under the old canal bridge you said
so i can hear the echoes
in your head
repeating mine
this time
when it throws
our voices from roof into water
where i caught her
reflection half in half out of sunshine.
that's when i hear Gerschwin
playing his piano in you
working out the notes
to rhapsody in blue
that makes me float
light and thin
deep within
through the air
when you put your comforts there.
Waits was drinking whisky from his bottle
while i sat through old days with Aristotle
knowing i must come up to date
because a woman does not have to wait.

SO IT GOES

(Strider Marcus Jones)

when i look back
in a moment
of quiet acquired dignity
that comes to some
with age,
it is with patience,
for i was much the same
when everything seemed bigger
than it was
as uncertainty
wore the other shoe to confidence
and followed it step for step.

the energy of youth
that often acts
without respect and understanding-
to bluff and blag its way
in fashion and musical rebellion-
skips like stones
on the ponds of those who have it all
from Parliaments revolution-
but their ripples wane
through treacled trends
in this dumbed down democracy
soothed by drugs and drink.

apathy watches and laughs
at these new roundheads and royals-
jigging their booty
to tunes composed
by capitalist cavaliers-
wearing each despotic Emperor's new clothes,
and a known assassins kiss of death
waits for anyone who questions-

so it goes.

Biographical Note: Michael Mc Aloran

Michael Mc Aloran was Belfast born, (1976). He is the author of a number of collections of poetry, prose poetry, poetic aphorisms and prose, most notably 'Attributes', (Desperanto, NY, 2011), 'The Non Herein' & 'Of Dead Silences' (Lapwing Publications, 2011/ 2013), 'All Stepped/ Undone', 'Of the Nothing Of', 'The Zero Eye', 'The Bled Sun', 'In Damage Seasons', (Oneiros Books (U.K)--2013/ 14); 'Code #4 Texts' a collaboration with the Dutch poet, Aad de Gids, was also published in 2014 by Oneiros. He was also the editor/ creator of Bone Orchard Poetry, & edited for Oneiros Books (U.K 2013/ 2014). A further collection, 'Un-Sight/ Un-Sound (delirium X.), was published by gnOme books (U.S), and 'In Arena Night' is forthcoming from Lapwing Publications. 'EchoNone' was also recently released by Oneiros Books...

Micheal Mc Aloran

#

*...opens unto vocal of unto/ fades then out unto/ fades then out fades in given unto
of recede...
traceless hours spent in/ echo's precipice/ not a/ blood reek of it/ motion bloom of
no...
wind skull fled blood not a/ dense collect/ recollect binds trace absent recollect...
feeds upon what or/ vibrate/ dense die not a/ nor once before/ nothing no/ dead
lense adrift in...
collapse what shed if colour obsolete/ colours obsolete/ collapse then none or
other of...
other of than how collapsed/ yet still unto/ vocal unto/ silenced/ absent
reclamation...*

#

*...absent pace trace fade out of/ skyline vocalized cannot/ reduced to approximate
none/ lapse of/ as if to...
in-dead recession/ approximate/ fade out/ it cannot if unto other than only of...
traces echoes for/ of/ neither nor not a/ zero forgotten it cannot other than of if...
drains of/ collapses unto/ a breakage of bone oceanic/ traceless to claim/ eye's
lack upon...
vault white dead-line head devours devour/ black light pulse utter utterance/
silenced...
all distance in or out of/ or of/ if/ forgotten if/ unto/ forgotten unto/ nowhere
bound...*

#

*sight sheared pulse of dissipatory/ unsung/ aptitude forgotten but once then of/
another...*

*in return to of/ not of/ silenced of/ stray/
blight wind collision deft what/ aptitude/ violet...*

*drag terse residue/ again/ another/ sung for another no/ wilt light black/ shadow
consumed...*

*yet of/ what else if/ cannot/ echo-din not another/
laughter-bellows/ adrift/ tidal absent...*

*yet harbor not a trace blind bitten/ exhalation prism/
fractured bitten ever of/ lapse/ pulse...*

*corpus broken stone abound/ vital of/ what of/
impress in sand erased by/ not a...*

#

*if or then what if another than/ silence yes/ obsolete/
obsolete yes what if or of/ claim disregard...*

*unto meat of forgotten effigies/ none what/ trace/
empties out of sense what sense/ as if to...*

*collision breath of out-skied realm of single breath/
it is/ if what/ silenced by...*

*cannot/ pulse dense disregard in yet as if to/ ever
trace if/ stone/ ever-if/ non-if/ if-forgotte...*

*rots what of a lie it echoes no/ collapse of echo of/
yet resurgent yet unto/ voice yet rot...*

embalmed vocal claim upon/ outro of shaft shut snap/ another hour dies out...

#

*...clamour no/ rescind of not once once/ sudden as if/ (pulse beat)/ echo-valve
shadowed none or from...
dead traces alongside breath bespoke/ catascope in roomscape/ dredge wind wars
of...
collapse of all shears through as to / bites vein of if/ extinguished dense as of
obscure/ (as was)...
obscurity/ tremolo beat of light erased/ dawn collision/ in reach lung lack/ absent
none/ tidal/ sung aloft...
eye shock waste percept some obsolete devour/ fingers that reach for.../ outro
oblivion tide/ else what no...
nothing crumpled into/ a ball of phlegm/ spat trace out into/ fissure present/
abhorrent...*

#

*...what is/ not no nothing if or other than ever was if into or of cannot/ matters not
yet or of...
(smear of absent light/ words echoing through/ azure/ taste taste attrition/ (strips
unto 'the a's disappearance')...
strip sky palm open as was of before ever asking of/ silenced in and of/ it...
bit stun hollow tint/ reclamation no/ delirium/ lock of snare white resolve/ it is shit/
maggot...
fossilized nothing/ discarded teeth in wombage/
disrecollect unto future silenced...

spark dread/ overture cascade of silenced/ carved into word lapse vital/ unsung/
unspoken...*

Biographical Note: MJ Duggan

MJ Duggan poems have appeared in The Seventh Quarry, Section 8, The Dawntreader, Roundyhouse, Apogee Magazine, Poetry Quarterly, Dwang 2, The Journal, Illumen, Yellow Chair Review, Jawline Review, Carillon, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Vagabonds, Lunar Poetry Magazine, The Screech Owl, Message in a Bottle, OF/With, IANASP, The Stare's Nest, The Cobalt Review, Sarasvati, Expound, Ex-Fic, Trysts of Fate. He had his first collection of poems published last year 'Making Adjustments For Life Expectancy'. MJ also created and host a spoken word evening at Hydra Bookshop in Bristol UK called 'Spoken Indulgence', and am the editor of a brand new poetry magazine 'The Angry Manifesto'. MJ has been shortlisted for the erbacce poetry prize 2015.

The Imprisonment of Pan
(MJ Duggan)

Naked skin sheared near to the bone
my number jotted in thick blue ink
where this wasteland is now my abode.
Horns hacked from my skull
I watched the shell like shadows fall,

like a God's fingertip scrawling the mountain
for the misplaced reaping of souls.
Rebooting my psyche strands of dissent removed from memory
my hooves were relined for these paths
stripped of any thoughts towards enmity,

the stomach neatly stitched
my snout drips of phlegm and lithium,
I'm barcoded microchipped
obeying the signs that have entrapped me,
no longer will I take the lead I follow when I'm told to follow!

The Silent City
(MJ Duggan)

Taste the rancid stench of this city
it's poison dripping down my tubes
rampaging through my rib cage,
innards a spiralling compass
like ink blots thrown from a damp page.

Locked inside their tin hounds
petrol clusters weave pockets of air,
we breathe in the swirling oxygen
that balances us in muted horror,
this daylight persists touching my skin
like glass faces left out in the sun.

I only feel alive when this city sleeps
so I can wander inside her dreams,
be that lone figure strolling the split of daybreak
hear no sound of the city's bloodstream
rushing the piles of sirens and mild chatter
contented with just the feel of a midnight breeze,
until....

The Watcher
(MJ Duggan)

I, the particles of lost sleep
atoms in dreams stolen from men,
a red dress in a black and white flick
the vision of a dead friend
talking through the smoke of candlestick,

arriving to whisper you that unfathomable end.
I, once the watcher of the city
the floating rust from queen white chandeliers
fast wind of dead electricity
morphing into the corners of bedroom mirrors,
an eye for collecting imagery a digitised iris for the states cavalier.

Through air vents down gutters of dirty foam
into the city, Eye and director of the unravelling
ear in the wall cavities of every citizen,
Imprisoned our the pious members of the house

Gone are the moon racers of determinism!
This city sleeps while its engine room wakes
burning the daylight coal dewy oil,
under clouds skinny and starchy
the day provides it's watchers.

Birdsong
(MJ Duggan)

Only when
the birdsong breaks
could he wake from his sleep!

This season he lay in dreams for days
while voices carried beneath him on the street,
the world had moved without him
as day turned into night and then repeats.

Trees are bare of all movement
Auburn figures stripped of song
in slumber he doesn't wake!

The morning's harmonious crescendo gone,
as sunlight tanned empty corridors
only those who hear NO birdsong
could wake into a world where no light belongs.

Lost In Translation
(MJ Duggan)

Inside her petrol blue eyes I was lost in a whirlpool
this love had held my windpipe and slowly tightened its grip,
she was a wild hybrid
a restless butterfly unable to relax her wings.
She picked up snails from the hillside and placed them onto a crooked wall
saving them from a loose gush of river,
Yet, if I was an injured sparrow she would surely be that hunting vixen
predatory in nature - a beautiful siren.

The rain trickled outside of the airport where we shared our last L&M blue
before our final goodbye she turned with the last words I'd ever hear from her

'You leave today! while my country starts to cry for you'

We were breathless animalistic beings
sharing more sweat than conversation,
within these short moments that we had
we would never be lost in memory or translation.

Biographical Note: Allison Grayhurst

Allison Grayhurst is a member of the League of Canadian Poets. She has over 550 poems published in more than 275 international journals and anthologies. Her book *Somewhere Falling* was published by Beach Holme Publishers in 1995. Since then she has published eleven other books of poetry and six collections with Edge Unlimited Publishing. Prior to the publication of *Somewhere Falling* she had a poetry book published, *Common Dream*, and four chapbooks published by The Plowman. Her poetry chapbook *The River is Blind* was published by Ottawa publisher above/ground press in December 2012. In 2014 her chapbook *Surrogate Dharma* was published by Kind of a Hurricane Press, Barometric Pressures Author Series in October 2014. More recently, she has a chapbook *Currents* pending publication this August with Pink.Girl.Ink. Press. She lives in Toronto with her family. She also sculpts, working with clay; www.allisongrayhurst.com

Some of places my work has appeared in include Parabola (Alone & Together print issue summer 2012); Literary Orphans; Blue Fifth Review; The American Aesthetic; Agave Magazine; South Florida Arts Journal; Gris-Gris; The Muse – An International Journal of Poetry, Storm Cellar, New Binary Press Anthology; The Brooklyn Voice; Straylight Literary Magazine (print); The Milo Review; Foliate Oak Literary Magazine; The Antigonish Review; Dalhousie Review; The New Quarterly; Wascana Review; Poetry Nottingham International; The Cape Rock; Ayris; Journal of Contemporary Anglo-Scandinavian Poetry; The Toronto Quarterly; Fogged Clarity, Boston Poetry Magazine; Decanto; White Wall Review.

Breaking the Circle
(Allison Grayhurst)

Trapped like a boat
under a wave or like
a girl in adolescent angst,
I feel the pouring of all my emotions,
wooing me to an attic hide-a-way.
There is no answer but to leap
from this sting, from the weeks
snagging my music, leap
from my birth, into a new heritage,
a journey of dreaming my madness alive.
Where will the crows be when I fall?
At my doorstep or above on telephone
wires, conveying comfort with their eyes?
Where will I fall from this navy sky? -
a word on a grain of rice, a lamp in a window,
a dying, but lucid voice? Seashells
collected as a child. The river is blind.
Trapped now and holding - soon it will end and
the trees outside will whisper, developing
a new landscape of imagination.

Overcoming
(Allison Grayhurst)

As the fledgling swallow falls
onto the rainy ground,
so false shields fall, leaving
us raw inside the middle, wet inside
the middle, spilling forth our old defence.

As the snows come in spring,
so greyness can cloak the brightest
change because it is change and is
hard to come by.

As two old people talk with their hats
and canes, so the angels talk to our hearts,
steadily being, patiently being beside
our every gesture.

As is the lamp in a winter's night, so
is the grace that feeds our eyes
with its kindness. And holy is the one
who stumbles but finds a way to stand.
And holy is the effort to love when the dragon
embraces our being within its scaly arms,
tries to break our faith with fiery addiction, or
with bitterness as blue as its damp, hungering tongue.

I Could Have
(Allison Grayhurst)

I could have waited
in my personal eternity with the yellowed books,
on the cold other-century floor, night upon night
reading of murderers and painters and women
confined to views of freedom, caught in a rebel
stratosphere. I could have underlined the philosophers,
changed channels on the radio,
stayed with my father's typewriter,
with my buckwheat mish-mash and the ants that collected near the sink.
I could have taught the rabbit to sing,
kept my special and comical cat - stayed
with my angry prayers and my exacta-knife,
craving equilibrium and knowing only a violent vacancy
that would find no distraction, nothing
to ease the pressure of such urgent longing.

(how lucky I didn't)

It was years after that when I found you
on the steps of the church,
embracing me with your black hair,
boyish charm, thin arms and
matching intensity. It was the first time since I was a child
that I could trust God, holding you,
joining my burden with your own -
and in doing so, alleviating the weight of its core.
It was the first time
I could leave that floor, the books, change direction
and see something
of happiness.

We Arrive
(Allison Grayhurst)

We arrive at the mountain's artery,
here in heaven's wind, not bending,
not drowning but tall as the mountain
itself.

We are intact from this decade-season
of insects and peril. Grief is not in our
arms nor is the locust's bitter bite.

We are content on this rock, replenished
by each other's kindness and by
our children's uncommon smiles.

We have lived with this thirst for so long and now
we are almost overflowing, not wanting or
tight-throat or quarantined by poverty's
pickled pill.

We give our thanks at this place
of somewhere over the threshold.

We have light, we have octagon curves.
Everything is lengthening, lifting
like a hangman's hood.

Room, no room
(Allison Grayhurst)

Moving in the circle of this ritual
smoking out my lungs, hand-paddling away
from the heat-strong current. The walls
have become a bookshelf on which
the books have been repeatedly read.
The walls are a room where there are
no windows and the paint is yellowing,
where the stale breath of confinement has
moved in.

I hear the animals deliver their outcast tongue
as the flame flows from the crack under the door.
I am folding and folding,
longing to join the delirium of a new language and of fire.
I cannot flourish in this parched land of ineffectual despair.
I long for a pond to catch tadpoles in.
I long for seeds to scatter,
or for now, just a small tool to chip away
at this concrete floor.

Biographical Note: Pijush Kanti Deb

Pijush Kanti Deb is a new Indian poet with more than 234 published or accepted poems and haiku in

more than 75 nos of national and international magazines and journals [print and online] like Down in the dirt, Tajmahal Review, Pennine Ink, Hollow Publishing, Creativica Magazine, Muse India, Teeth Dream Magazine, Hermes Poetry Journal, Madusa's Kitchen, Grey Borders, Dead Snakes, Dagda Publishing, Blognostic and many more.

- His best achievement so far is the publication of his first poetry collection, 'Beneath The Shadow Of A White Pigeon' published by Hollow Publishing is available on AMAZON visiting the link,

[http://www.amazon.com/Beneath-Shadow-White-Pigeon-Pijush/dp/1505854113/re](http://www.amazon.com/Beneath-Shadow-White-Pigeon-Pijush/dp/1505854113/ref=sr_1_1_tw_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1422829526&sr=8-1&keywords=beneath+the+shadow+of+a+white+pigeon)

f=sr_1_1_tw_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1422829526&sr=8-

1&keywords=beneath+the+shadow+of+a+white+pigeon

- OR,
- <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/beneath-the-shadow-of-a-white-pigeon-mr-pijush-kanti-deb/1121156263?ean=9781505854114&isbn=9781505854114>

Still More to Love and Beloved
(Pijush Kanti Deb)

A good man's peaceful slumber
allows some of his dormant badness
to wake up
and start climbing the stairs
to reach his luminous roof- a para-paradise
for calling the dancing imps from hell
to trample the soft goodness
of the good man down
forgetting his sensitive sub-consciousness
resulting in
one sided win of the good over the bad
when the climbing badness is apprehended,
pulled down and sent back
to the address-less dark den
assuming still more to love and be loved.

A Favorable Decision
(Pijush Kanti Deb)

Finally the bell is rung
and my sagacity wakes up
with a favorable decision
of conducting an aerial journey
up in the sky towards the Sun-
the super-superlative,
to maintain a touching distance
between me and the king of light
with no terms and conditions
resulting in
the empowerment of my prayer to the sun
to pull the super-luminous
nearer to my sweat producing hell
for making my groaning face visible
to my colleagues, friends and neighbors
and to push the super-fire too
far away from my paradise-
built and collocated by my blood and sweat
for making my smiling face invisible
to avoid hazardous heart-burning
on the part of both-
me and my unavoidable counterparts.

The Substitute Shadow
(Pijush Kanti Deb)

A maturing fruit
longs for acquiring the purchasing power
for a beautiful umbrella-
an independent substitute of the cool shadow
of its native tree
and some mad moments too to enjoy or suffer
revealing the raising masculinity of the fruit,
its irresistible longing for new to accept
rejecting the old – maybe made of gold
but the gratefulness interferes
circumscribing the fruit as a unbreakable girdle
until the shadow of the tree becomes narrower
than the fruit's ever-widening curious eyes
resulting in a crowd of loneliness
wherein the old tree is banished by its own fruit
forgetting the wild wind
though defeated by the tree
yet proves to be an expert
in stealing the colorful shadow of the beloved umbrella.

Tension
(Pijush Kanti Deb)

It would have been good
for the poor heads-
fit for the thorny crowns,
if tension were a stock-
once goes then never comes back again.

Alas !

It's a flow on the contrary,
upon which it comes swimming
bites blindly and goes back to return again
to strain the brains for good.

But an ordinary opines,

“ It is not to take but to give”

and thus it's born in every moment
while an extra-ordinary challenges,

“ It's to take, check and search out
its self-destructive button”

and hence it dies

in every next moment

for replacing itself by a new born tension.

The Neglected Refugee
(Pijush Kanti Deb)

The extra piece of bread-
the neglected refugee
made by the brimful stomach
exhibits the pride and contumacy
nurtured by the egoist,
along with a few dirty flies
rotating on it;
relates the secret story
of the partial clouds
those shed extra-rainfall in the ocean
keeping the desert aside
thirsty and gloomy,
tempts diplomatically to be misused
in the formation of Hemlock-
a great follower of the canon of equality,
to bring ocean and desert together
around the same table
to enjoy the wonderful by-product
forgetting the cause and effect
of their fortune-good or bad,
and bewitches the inelastic stones to enjoy
the greatness of the ocean
lying on the dry sand of the desert.

Biographical Note: John Doyle

John Doyle, 39, from County Kildare has recently returned to writing poetry after a considerable absence. He was educated at N.U.I. Maynooth, and is influenced by a diverse range of writers, many of whom do not adhere to canonical peccadilloes.

Sermon
(John Doyle)

Most of us
are
unexceptional,
sure, we grab kids too frisky at traffic lights,
give homes to
abandoned puppies,
say something kind to 91 year olds
dribbling on hospital drips
having no-one or nothing
to conduct their bottleneck codas,
no words, no deeds,
us, shielding them from immeasurable death.

But then there's God and the Devil
fighting cocks
in fluorescent lit cellar,
entrancing meek men in sleeveless stained vests
pregnant in molehill guts,
clasping their wads of spit-washed currency,
scooters snarling their gears on cow dung streets upstairs.

One supernatural begins elevation
and a crowd recoils in awe...

Death Imitates Art
(John Doyle)

Were he shot down
he would have asked two concessions:

One - it occurred in standard issue haunted house
Two - gigantic shiny spider did the deed.

A nut shelled beast, bluebottle colours chalked in moonglow
he "a little tied up at the moment, can't come to the phone"

Typed in Gothic script
a painted ghost in a woven work of art

Her Name is Emily or Claire
(John Doyle)

Diamond pattern window
giving me a semblance of scientist's scope
my hands are squeezed inside them
on this sky of outsides
they criss-cross time
'til my fingertips cower
under a murder of cackling evening crows,

life orders these marshmallowed blossoms
pock-marked in sentient sequences along
a glowing mahogany fence
a barbecue next door
a girl who shrieks electrocuting her feet
pebbles rasp, a pair of Converse sneakers
left on a kitchen floor.

Shock mummified its call-sign
on wickers of drifting night
blossoms weep what they can for carnage
though soon it seems she is asleep
a car silk smooth on cool July tar
a pastiche of her future dreams
breaking water's skin

boat guided along by her fingertips
soon in flappers, margin along a misty shore
remembering split screen 1971 George Roy Hill montage
she will grow to love her Dorothy Parker hat
her mother's milk white oceans
her view, a segment cocooned in this powdery dusk
and a man whose thumb holds his chin next door.

An hour since she was weeping
a diamond cut from almost dark
her eyes that reflect from my wailing light
her name is probably Emily or Claire
asleep now -
a requiem for her startled mouth
and the stillness still in descent

Biographical Note: Steve Klepetar

Helen Harrison was raised on the Wirral, seven miles from Liverpool, by Irish parents, and has lived most of her adult life in the border countryside of Co Monaghan, Ireland where she is married with a grown-up daughter.

Helen has performed poetry at The 'Bray Art Show' and 'The Monaghan Art Show'.

She also enjoys the 'open mic' scene around the country.

Her poems have been published in A New Ulster, North West Words and The Bray Journal.

Her first collection of poetry 'The Last Fire' was published during 2015 by Lapwing.

Some of her poetry can be found at: poetry4on.blogspot.com.

Mustangs

(Steve Klepetar)

loosened in stampede
of gales – hooves and streaming

manes. We followed
a dancing flood, wild typhoon

of swirling light. Music of flame
beat in our ears. The river

has frozen between its banks, rough
where wind stilled water's white hair.

On the Ladder

She can't stop seeing him there, up on a ladder
eyes swimming with stars in this black December,
hammer forgotten in his hand, one precarious
foot a rung above the other, curious, frozen dance.

There's the Dipper etched in the sky, familiar
as a friend passed on the street. What does he
see in his strange astronomy that her hazel-sharp
eyes miss, what swirling light coalescing into meaning

as the ladder creaks and his beard freezes white?
Has she become his shadow, scuttling in the kitchen
scrubbing pots or huddling beneath her blanket
when, at last, leftovers wrapped and put away, she sits,

letting weariness flood her bones and blood, or
the flesh he returns to when his shaman journey ends?

The King of Salt

(Steve Klepetar)

lived in a palace of glass
near a river that tasted like the sea.

One daughter said she loved him
more than diamonds, more than ruby-eyed

deer who roam the forest of tears.
Another said she valued him above pearls

her lover gave, long strings
that hung like tiny moons between her breasts.

All that love! But the youngest slipped out
and disappeared beyond the whispering caves.

She took nothing but a bag of the coral salt
her father loved, its faint pink crystals shining

in moonless dark. So many tongues
left wandering, such a flurry of hands and wounds.

Lost to him, she became a picture in his mind,
memory less of youthful face and metallic sound of truth,

than taste, a flavor between the scent of salt
marsh in the wind and the tang of his golden fish.

Mountain Man
(Steve Klepetar)

You might have come down
from the mountains searching
for gold, with broken teeth

and snow in your hair, savage
breathing smoke and wind.
With that startled expression

you might have been in a play,
your face an even better mask
for the wildness in your blue

eyes, those empty gems of light.
Where were you behind that mouth,
writing stories in the frigid air

as you entered the body of a mountain
man, the one who built a fortress
in the rock face of his beating heart?

Too Late

(Steve Klepetar)

It was too late to call, but not late enough for sleep
especially with my back on fire, waiting for pills

to kick in again with their warm, liquid touch, and pain
dulled to a small gray circle, mimicking the matte white

moon, just past full as I gaze out my window to the north,
your name floating above my head into the night sky,

breaking into a thousand brilliant birds knifing above
the river in an angry V. Your voice is a meadow in spring,

a secret lake where swans glide through early morning mist.
Sitting here without you feels like a train frozen on the track

in the middle of a field, waiting without explanation for the roar
of engines and rock of motion, side to side and forward

toward some destination I've forgotten, holding in my burning
hands a book conceived of glass, light reflecting off a smoky page.

Biographical Note: Peter O' Neill

Peter O' Neill was born in Cork in 1967. He is the author of four critically acclaimed collections of poetry. His fifth, *The Enemy, Transversions from Charles Baudelaire*, has just been published by Lapwing in Belfast. He has edited *And Agamemnon Dead, An Anthology of Early Twenty First Century Poetry* with Walter Ruhlmann and *MG 81 Transverser*, also with Walter Ruhlmann.

Gombeen Reading of the Impossibility of the Rose

Poem Cycle Inspired by a poem by Onno Demirciyan

Transversed from a Turkish Crib of the Armenian by Neil Patrick Doherty

1.

The long worn summer dresses, open at the knee

revelations on a sidewalk,
or bus
this wedge illuminating the tender flesh
of dawn
its ingots

warmed and feathered by the sun
only to be held by the stiff embrace of the library chairs
in universities,

or by the wooden stools in the coffee house
such cool steppe of skin have they held ransom
the many confused heads of men
calmed the torrent of thought's flood

damned the reservoirs of fear and despair
by the mere fact of their luscious promise

berthed a navy of hope in the eyes

they the impetus of all columns
they the twin pillars upholding every state
they the last refuge before the oncoming slaughter

2.

The silence in the doubt of the windowsill

overlooking the open playing field
the Black Hills rising like lightly baked cakes

in the oven
their soul lantern being the sun
illuminating carefully the closed crops of sentinel cloud

all figures passing here below being both
at once
wanderer and pilgrim touched by the Egyptian dawn
prefigured in the shape of owls
and earth marching beetle

passing onto the un-enlightened Georgian
the Austenesque pastures rolling down to
greet the obelisks erected in the town squares

all breed thoughts of a sole grave

one lost casualty from the Civil War
which now only serves to register
the sale of eggs
upon
the neighbour's wall

3.

*The paten that knows the shape of your mouth,
the weight of your tongue*

to upend one with the wicked lip of minds
trace of all words lost with the taste
but for the goo of saliva salavers
slavering tongues tonguing

the other

in rolling motions wordless wonder at the mind's tilt
eclipse of thought's unthinking
actions speaking so much
till finally silenced

till another dumb member
speaking through movement
speaks through gesture

till thoughts, finally , disremembered

tongues tonguing till the grip on her head..
those feckin' pants off

4.

The hush in your praying voice.

so audible as to help the manoeuvre of the hand
the fingers then acting as lips
the pencil a kind of leaden tongue
versing the heart and blood undone

or possibly more needle
infusing the rush of untold logarithm
if it can be said why write it?
the unuttered thoughts heard the voice dispelled

that word in your ear
transcribing vistas unseen

imploding within the mind

the silent invisible structures

raising up the architexts
their

as yet

unseen

pyramid

Biographical Note: Dr Mel Waldman

Dr. Mel Waldman is a psychologist, poet, and writer whose stories have appeared in numerous magazines including HARDBOILED DETECTIVE, HARDBOILED, DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, ESPIONAGE, THE SAINT, DOWN IN THE DIRT, CC&D, PULP METAL MAGAZINE, INNER SINS, YELLOW MAMA, and AUDIENCE. His poems have been widely published in magazines and books including LIQUID IMAGINATION, A NEW ULSTER, THE BROOKLYN LITERARY REVIEW, THE BROOKLYN VOICE, BRICKPLIGHT, THE BITCHIN' KITSCH, CLOCKWISE CAT, CRAB FAT MAGAZINE, SKIVE MAGAZINE, ODDBALL MAGAZINE, ON THE RUSK, POETRY PACIFIC, POETICA, RED FEZ, SQUAWK BACK, SWEET ANNIE & SWEET PEA REVIEW, THE JEWISH LITERARY JOURNAL, THE JEWISH PRESS, THE JERUSALEM POST, HOTMETAL PRESS, MAD SWIRL, HAGGARD & HALLOO, ASCENT ASPIRATIONS, and NAMASTE FIJI: THE INTERNATIONAL ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY. A past winner of the literary GRADIVA AWARD in Psychoanalysis, he was nominated for a PUSHCART PRIZE in literature and is the author of 11 books. Four of his mystery, fantasy, and horror stories were published by POSTSCRIPTS, a British magazine and international anthology, in November 2014. He recently completed an experimental mystery novel inspired by one of Freud's case studies and is looking for an agent. He has been inspired for decades by his patients and their heroic stories of trauma and survival.

I
AM
EMPTY

(Dr. Mel Waldman)

I am empty
&
like all the holy creatures of the cosmos,

I come from nowhere
&
shall return to the unfathomable place beyond earth and the heavens.

But now,
I stand naked before the oval Mirror of Revelations
&

when I gaze into the ancient object,
I see the faceless face of nothingness,
for

I am invisible,
like the obscure creatures
of

oblivion,
&
soon,

I shall vanish forever
in the womb
of

the *Without End*,
&
I am empty,

a barren receptacle,
flesh-less, river-less, & spirit-less,

&

naked, bare & bereft,
waiting
for the

Source of everything
&
nothing

to fill
me
up

&
set me
free

WAIT
FOR
YESTERDAY
(Dr. Mel Waldman)

Wait for yesterday,
&
when it returns,

watch the phantom river rush forth,
with fury
&

passion,
pouring out of the primal ocean
below your ancient mansion,

rising mercilessly in mammoth waves,
a whirling force blasting a hole
through

the dank basement floor,
antediluvian
fortress,

&
the roaring river shatters all,
your secret stories

exploding
in an oceanic catharsis,
a sprawling cleansing,

for your wounded self,
sailing on scattered
shards,

of memory,
kaleidoscopic images,
&

ancient traumas
swimming upstream
in

phantasmagoria,
higher and higher to consciousness,
&

omnipotent purification,
opening your mind's eye
to

strange unfathomable visions
flooding
your landscape,

revelations of the shadow of your
shadow,
so eerily familiar and foreign

BROOKLYN NIGHTS
(Dr. Mel Waldman)

The twilight
melts,
dissolves,
&
disappears into the ethereal flow of darkness

&
Brooklyn nights
cover me, cut my fire,

&
the cocoon of seething images

explodes,
shatters shards of time,

&
burns my ocean of dreams,

&
Brooklyn nights cover me, cover all, me

&
gazing into the oval mirror,

eerie & unendurable,
I rediscover

the battered bestial faces of my lost landscape-
my harrowing history, my death, ours-

everyone I have loved, who loved me,
&

vanished inside the bruised earth,
below the country of cosmic breaths,
&
others who wandered off into the long, slow death

of
madness or dementia

&
inside the oval mirror,

I observe the grotesquerie, the ghastly ghosts
of

my nonbeing-my phantom selves
shrieking-

the howling & ululations & unholy losses
&

the vast eerie eldritch emptiness
&

the everlasting deaths that devour my scattered
parts

on
the other side of, the swirling shattering-

&
on Brooklyn nights,

my crippled hands reach into this unreal oval universe
&

clutch my unbearable nothingness as
I

melt & dissolve &
disappear

with the sinking
shrinking twilight

of
my secret labyrinth

invisible
& unfathomable & unending

THE WIDOWER
(Dr. Mel Waldman)

(Dedicated to those we lost to AIDS)

Without his wife, the widower, trapped in his frozen past, peered vacantly out his tiny window in his minuscule studio, and found a world he didn't recognize. He stayed inside his claustrophobic haven and hid until the canopy of loneliness, a lethal emptiness, choked him, and drove him outside to inhale the miasma-free air.

Yet without the slender thread of connection, he was lost.

He found a prostitute and a sleazy hotel room for quick, unprotected sex. But for a few minutes, he pretended she was his dead wife.

And the widower had a lust-saturated sexual/emotional encounter that briefly killed his loneliness. It also killed him, for he contracted AIDS.

TRACES
(Dr. Mel Waldman)

After the cornucopia of loss, the fierce flow of death, and death with every mask it wears, I exist between the abyss of raw emptiness, a rabid infinity that grabs my throat, bites my cosmic breath, and growls incessantly after a red sunset, and throughout the crimson night, below a full moon overflowing with madness.

In my mutilated mirror, I find only traces of my old self; can't recognize the odd face beneath the lines of interminable loss. Can a man suffer this much?

I exist only in the tiny interludes that shrink while the malignant emptiness expands and consumes me.

Only traces remain in the ruins of my weather-beaten face, wrinkled and scarred in the season of unbearable absence and perched above my shattered self.

"Who is this stranger?" a faraway voice whispers, echoing the susurrations of a velvet zephyr flowing across a vanishing face.

"I am the traces of a man brushed by the west wind of loss," a mournful voice murmurs, like the psithurism of rustling leaves and the whisper of wind in the trees.

INTRODUCTION

TO

INFINITY

(Dr. Mel Waldman)

The long lingering snow
falls
incessantly

a fierce frozen unfathomable flow

&
in a poignant moment
of
mystery & metanoia

a fantastic cornucopia of flakes

I change my mind

covers inner space

&
say goodbye

a sweeping canopy of dreams

a silent sinuous goodbye to my antediluvian pain & suffering
&
rush slowly from my secret labyrinth

*clutching furious unendurable wounds
of
ice & fire,*

*searching for the ethereal opening
in the skin of perception*

&
beyond

the maze of my mutilated brain cells,

I shall bathe
naked
in
the opalescence of the soothing sun,

in
my
oceanic introduction to infinity,

&
say hello to the holy,

an everlasting
hello

holy, holy, holy

reverberating
&
ricocheting
through the sprawling sacred universe

Biographical Note: Rachel Sutcliffe

Rachel Sutcliffe (Yorkshire, England) has suffered from a serious immune disorder for the past 15 years, throughout this time writing has been her therapy, it's kept her from going insane. She is an active member of the British Haiku Society and the online writing group Splinter4all. Her work has appeared in numerous print and online journals including: Hedgerow, Prune Juice, Brass Bell, The Heron's Nest and A Hundred Gourds. Find her @ <http://projectwords11.wordpress.com>.

Summer Haiku & Senryu Selection
(Rachel Sutcliffe)

summer noon
the city streets
shimmer

summer sun
the road to the lake
water too

sea breeze
waves ripple
over the dunes

rock pooling
fishing the sun
out of the seaweed

lingering heat
the scent of sea salt
on skin

day at the seaside
cleaning the beach
out of the car

heavy clouds
darkening the pavement
summer rain

summer rain
a canopy over
the crime scene

heat haze
blurring the truth
with your lies

hot sands
we skip over
the real problem

If you fancy submitting something but haven't done so yet, or if you would like to send us some further examples of your work, here are our submission guidelines:



SUBMISSIONS

NB - All artwork must be in either BMP or JPEG

format. Indecent and/or offensive images will not be published, and anyone found to be in breach of this will be reported to the police.

Images must be in either BMP or JPEG format.

Please include your name, contact details, and a short biography. You are welcome to include a photograph of yourself - this may be in colour or black and white.

We cannot be responsible for the loss of or damage to any material that is sent to us, so please send copies as opposed to originals.

Images may be resized in order to fit "On the Wall". This is purely for practicality.

E-mail all submissions to: g.greig3@gmail.com and title your message as follows: (Type of work here) submitted to "A New Ulster" (name of writer/artist here); or for younger contributors: "Letters to the Alley Cats" (name of contributor/parent or guardian here). Letters, reviews and other communications such as Tweets will be published in "Round the Back". Please note that submissions may be edited. All copyright remains with the original author/artist, and no infringement is intended.

These guidelines make sorting through all of our submissions a much simpler task, allowing us to spend more of our time working on getting each new edition out!



June 2015 MESSAGE FROM THE ALLEYCATS:

We have a Go Fund Me campaign so as to afford better tuna.

Well, that's just about it from us for this edition everyone.

Thanks again to all of the artists who submitted their work to be presented "On the Wall". As ever, if you didn't make it into this edition, don't despair! Chances are that your submission arrived just too late to be included this time. Check out future editions of "A New Ulster" to see your work showcased "On the Wall".





Arizahn & Friends



Round The Back

Biographical Note: E V Greig

Author and Illustrator [E.V. Greig](#) is a graduate of Queen's University Belfast, where she studied Ancient History and English. She lives in rural Northern Ireland along with her husband and several pets. Her fast-paced debut novel "**The Legend Of Graymyrh**" was developed with the support of SIAP 2013. It is a no holds barred High Fantasy for adults, and is currently under consideration for the Sunday Times/Peters Fraser & Dunlop Young Writer of the Year Award 2015. Her second published novel "**Project Nightingale**" is a sharp little book about spies set within an imagined near future Earth. The sequel "**Patron Saint Of Cats**" expands further into our solar system, and is scheduled for publication later this year.



PROJECT NIGHTINGALE

It is the late 21st Century. Whilst mega corporations and governments fight a less than discrete war for control of the general population, there are others who operate within the traditional boundaries of Intelligence. Walking in the shadows and trading in secrets, these operatives will do whatever is necessary to complete their missions. In the interest of maintaining public ignorance, someone is needed to clean up in their wake. That someone is Nightingale Spence, aka Housekeeping - a unique blend of assassin, medic, alibi merchant, and therapist to some of the most inventively lethal people in the world...

Chapter One – No Names, No Details

“He has vital intelligence; you must bring him back alive – is that understood?”

Nightingale Spence yawned and nodded automatically despite there being no way that those at headquarters could see the gesture. “Bring him back alive, got it.”

“He’ll be in Room 406 of the hotel. Don’t get distracted, and don’t let him bleed out.”

“That was implied in the order to bring him back alive. I’ll take him straight to medical.”

There was a slight pause and then a sigh. “He hates medical. You’ll need to patch him up yourself.”

“Should I bring superglue or plasters, ma’am?”

“God alone knows.”

That had been twenty six minutes earlier. Now Spence was standing in the doorway of Room 406 and attempting not to let the operative in question collapse. “Look, if you fall over now mate, I can’t get you back up.”

He was smirking despite the pain, or at least attempting to do so. “Scrawny sort of a thing for a field operative, aren’t you?”

“Shut up and sit down before you fall down.”

“Bossy...how come everyone is so bloody bossy..?”

Spence sighed, kicked the door shut, and managed to drag him to the bed. “Sit!”

It was fairly typical for operatives to be less than obedient, and more so when injured. This fellow was no exception, but nor was he stupid. He sat and did no more than grimace as his impromptu physician set to work. “This was my favourite shirt, you know.”

“Mmn-hmm, I count two small calibre rounds to your left bicep and three cracked ribs.”

“It was a rough day at the office..!”

“So help me, if you start coughing up blood, I shall be most displeased.”

The tone dragged him back enough to refocus his wits. “No coughing up blood; got it.”

“Good man.”

“Are you a doctor then?”

“Not as such, but I can patch this up well enough for you to be fit to travel.”

His eyes were blue; there was something both playful and wary to them. A clammy sweat that had grown out of exertion, pain and probably alcohol beaded his pale skin and made the longish black hair appear lank. “Are we taking a trip, not really a doctor?”

“Yes; back to headquarters.”

“I got the hard drive. It’s in my jacket.”

Spence glanced briefly at the jacket that was draped over the coffee table. “Well done.”

It was painful how important those two words appeared to be to him. “It’s what I do.”

“You’re beyond drunk.”

“I didn’t have any morphine.”

And of course that was a perfectly rational explanation. Sometimes Spence felt that they asked too much of them – these wandering creatures of mass destruction and unbridled chaos given human form. *Point them at the enemy, and watch the shenanigans ensue. Just don’t ever let them drive within the UK.* “Morphine is overrated anyhow.”

“Oh? Did they make a new...is there a better one now?”

Observing someone in this much pain was less than enjoyable. “They’re working on one.”

“Can I...can I have some please..?”

“Once we get back to headquarters, yes.”

He hissed a little as the bullets were dragged loose, and muttered in something that sounded vaguely chthonic as the wounds were cleaned and dressed. “First class ticket I should hope, not really a doctor?”

“Budget cuts I’m afraid. We’re going by car – there’s a driver already waiting for us outside.”

“I can drive.”

“You’ll be busy sleeping.”

“Not tired – sleep when I’m dead.”

“You’ll sleep when I tell you to and that’s final.”

He chuckled at that and made a vague attempt at a salute. “Drill sergeant..!”

Spence dabbed a bit more arnica gel onto the bruising about the operative’s ribcage. “Housekeeping, actually – I clean up everyone else’s mess.”

“Do you...do you have a mop then? Is it a mop with a gun in it?”

“Sometimes, yes; it depends on the mission. Now – put this on.”

“You brought me a new shirt.”

“I think of everything.” Which was true; the role that Spence performed was reliant in equal parts upon inventiveness and foresight.

It took him four attempts to fasten the buttons properly, and by then Spence had finished clearing up. “Housekeeping – is that what I call you then?”

“It’s what everyone calls me.”

“I’m called – “

“No names, no details. Let’s go.”

He looked hurt but followed along without protest.

The corridor was empty, as was the lift. There was a single receptionist at the desk in the foyer, but the room had been pre-booked and there was no bill to settle. For once, it seemed that extraction would be simple.

That illusion vanished the moment that they reached the spot where the doorman ought to have been and found a pair of gunmen instead. “Hello there – you two look like the people we’re here to find!” The two enemy operatives moved forwards, weapons ready. “British Intelligence at its best, yes?”

The receptionist was levelling a gun now too. “That’s the operative; this must be his back-up.”

Spence sighed. “Why can’t we all be reasonable about this?” There were three guns and one injured operative too many to risk this argument. “You want the intelligence, we want to keep breathing. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Hand over the drive.” Gunman number two was less chatty, it seemed.

“You heard him; he wants the hard drive.” Spence winked at the now bemused British operative; who was barely upright but still clearly too stubborn to co-operate. “Let him have it!”

It was always incredible to watch when an operative improvised. Although, they wouldn’t be able to use this particular hotel again; given that security had been compromised. And the bullet holes in the walls – hoteliers always hated those. Still, it was done. The three dead enemy operatives would be written up as a robbery that had gone badly wrong when the receptionist attempted to play hero.

Spence had informed headquarters and the technical people were already placing the required details onto the relevant computers. The CCTV footage had been wiped. All that remained was to get home safely. Their driver glanced at them in his rear view mirror as they fastened their seat belts. “Any change to the route?”

“No thank you.” Spence relaxed backwards against the leather headrest. “All’s well.”

There was a cough from the injured operative. “So tell me, why no names and no details?”

“It’s simpler to remain detached.”

“Well it sounds bloody lonely to me.”

“I wade through bodies for a living. I don’t have time to learn their names.”

“But I’m not dead!”

“No one starts out dead. They all end up there sooner or later.”

“My God, that’s depressing.”

“It’s the truth.”

The driver had closed the privacy screen. Spence’s companion continued his argument. “It’s one truth, or one part of a truth! Don’t you have friends in the job?”

“Not out here.”

“Coping mechanism, eh?”

“I’m simply being practical.”

He grunted. “Well, I’m called – “

“Please don’t. I really don’t need to know.”

“Alright, call me – call me Smith! It isn’t my name, but it makes talking simpler.”

“We don’t need to talk. You need to sleep.”

Smith’s eyelids were already drooping. “Cheers for the help, Housekeeping.”

“It’s what I do, Mr Smith.”

“You do it well.”

“So they tell me.” Spence thought of another conversation: twenty years ago; a pair of teenagers stuck playing at being socialites and hating every moment. *Where have the years taken that boy to – that lanky youth with so many dreams and so little hesitation?*

The car took a smooth turn to the right then and merged warily into the traffic streaming out of the city. There was a vague threat of snow behind those too still clouds, and the brilliance of the city’s lights masked stars which would otherwise have been too clear to be warm. November again, just as then, but Spence was alone tonight and had been so for well beyond a decade. No mobile devices then beyond radios – it had been frighteningly simple to lose touch with one another.

And now the risk of reconnection loomed – would he even want to hear word? His life had taken a different path. They were worlds apart surely. Perhaps that was better. There was little hope of merely picking up where they had left off. Too much water and more than too much blood had flowed under that bridge. The boy was a man now; this was not a world for children or for vague dreams.

Beside Spence, Smith was muttering his way through sleep. The operative would be out of commission for a few weeks at least. Hopefully he would make the most of the time, but when did they ever see rest as important? Obsessive devotion to duty was a key feature in this role. It spurred them on past the normal limits of endurance and blurred the pain of the latest bullet into little more than a dull nag at the back of their thoughts.

It was utterly mad and Spence relished every shred of it. Smith did too; he wouldn’t be there otherwise. No – he would have been a banker or perhaps a stockbroker. Something clean and well ordered, where he wouldn’t end his career bleeding out alone and unknown in a puddle of his own innards. And that was the most usual sort of an ending for them – that or torture by one of Britain’s many enemies. Spence was employed to prevent the latter and clean up the former. A foul but vital occupation within a tangled hush of secrets and deceptions echoing back at least as far as the Great War, and almost certainly beyond it.

No – he was not named Smith. That was a cover for a cover for a ghost wrapped up inside a shadow. Spence had managed such important unknowns for the past ten Novembers and a few months prior besides. It was an art in itself, just as much as what they did. Someone had to clean up the bodies; the

shell casings and broken windows. All the messy remnants of a job well done and a world saved once again at the eleventh hour.

Secret radios and miniature bombs had remained amidst the rise of increasingly tiny phones. Code breaking had evolved into coding; cypher melting into cyber and somehow back again. Computers were the blood of it nowadays, along with satellite surveillance, facial recognition software, IP tracking, and forensic accounting. Everything had been digitised but the endgame still revolved around the operative with the coldest nerve; be that behind a computer screen or a gun.

The world of tomorrow was upon them all. Spence wondered what the boy made of it now that he had grown. He had always had an innate understanding of technology. *Is he out there somewhere behind a terminal, or perhaps underneath a half completed chassis for some new vehicle? Or has he gotten past his horror of killing and taken to the field himself?*

Spence regretted mocking him now. Mercy was not so pathetic a quality when one knew the cost of it. They had been friends before that awful conversation. Spence knew now as then that they could easily have been much more. Perhaps they ought to have been. Probably that was the truth of it; the reason that any risk of a kind word had seemed too dreadful. Commitment was not either of their strong suits, not really, but the boy was the type that might have attempted to become better at it. Even then Spence had understood that.

What sort of a man did you become? Do you think of that evening in November; the too expensive restaurant with its crisp white tablecloths and velveteen seats? Do you think of that argument?

It seemed so very small now, looking back - two silly teenagers; both too desperate to grow up to realise the worth of what they could have had together. Spence closed both eyes and imagined what his face would be now. There had always been a catlike mixture of guile and amused disdain in his eyes - blue beneath his black hair; the injured operative whose actual name was not Smith had triggered that memory. But Smith, whoever else he really was, could surely never have been that boy! Life simply didn't play out so very kindly. *Two lost little pieces would surely never find each other like this – would they?*

The operative mumbled and yawned then, and the sound edged Spence into looking at him more closely. It still had to be impossible for this battered operative to be that long lost boy. And yet there were similarities; the turn of the jaw line, the soft throb of his pulse. The scent of him, albeit overlaid now with layers of alcohol, cordite, sweat and the copper scratch of blood.

Christ on a bicycle; what would be the odds?

Chapter Two – Not Enough Gin In The World

Greg Hull had been having trouble sleeping for months now. Almost dying had not agreed with him, and the internal politics at work were not helping. His cardiologist had told him to avoid stress.

All the good diet and exercise in the world won't stop another heart attack if you don't take things a little easier, Mr Hull.

Hull understood that all too well. The first one had been down to stress as well, but it hadn't been as severe as the second. Things had been less complicated then too: it had been far easier to follow the advice of the doctors that time around. Until that mess in Tokyo had happened. That had gotten everyone running in circles, and Hull along with them.

He'd been too busy counting up the fallen to recognise his own symptoms. Halfway through a mission briefing, he had collapsed. Three days later he woke up in intensive care and damn it but he'd only gone and dropped the ball with Tokyo. His cardiologist had flatly refused to entertain the idea of him returning to work at that point.

Two strikes in a row, Mr Hull; three and you'll be out of the game entirely. We don't want that now, do we?

No; of course they didn't. But you could never really get out of the game, not the game that Hull played anyhow. He'd been a part of it for more than half of his life now, and he was extremely good at what he did. Although his years of experience hadn't been enough to prevent Tokyo...the others were still cleaning up the aftermath even now, almost two years on. Hull had been politely, even kindly reassigned to other duties elsewhere.

Elsewhere equated to anywhere that wasn't staring at the only now levelling out death toll. All of those lives snuffed out as though they had never counted at all. Little wonder that his dreams were so unsettled. Several of those who had been working the initial event had retired since then. Two of them turned up dead, the rest just forgot as best they could. Hull was finding it impossible to forget. He had the feeling that turning up dead would be inconsiderate of him, and so he kept on breathing, and nodded and smiled politely as required.

Headquarters was as discretely busy as ever when they arrived. The driver handed over responsibility to a team of medics and stepped quietly away into the gloom of the underground car park. Spence edged clear of the fuss and slunk upstairs to report back to Pembleton.

As always, the spymistress was brusque. "Tidily done, Housekeeping. Medical are optimistic, and the data is already proving to be invaluable."

"Good to know, ma'am. Will there be anything further?"

"No, not for the moment; you may go."

Spence nodded and went in search of tea. The cafeteria was mostly empty, aside from the bored woman staffing the till and a pair of boffins babbling in some form of higher mathematics in the far corner. One of them waved cheerfully. "Spence – come and sit with us!"

"Mr Whitby; and how are things with your accursed robot army today?"

"I keep telling you it isn't an army."

"They have enough firepower to take down a small country."

"That doesn't make them an army." Whitby sniffed. "You reek of death and bullets again. What happened?"

"Extraction in Strasbourg and a long drive back. I haven't had the chance to shower yet."

Whitby's fellow technician nodded towards the corridor. "They've installed a new wet room for post operational recoveries."

"And how many cameras are there in the showerheads?"

The two geniuses had the decency to blush before denying any involvement in the ongoing potential case for harassment that made up the internal surveillance of the building. Only the vague growl of the Official Secrets Act kept things from bubbling over into actual legal action.

Whitby was in truth offended by it. “Those devices are utterly outmoded; it’s a joke.”

“I expect the water pressure isn’t up to much either.” Spence attempted to swallow the greyish liquid that claimed to be tea. “This is foul.”

“We’ve started bringing our own from home.” The female technician raised her mug in a mock toast. “Here’s to decent beverages!”

“I’d drink to that, but I want to live.”

Whitby chuckled. “So who was it anyhow?”

“Strasbourg? Oh – no one special. Chatty fellow; going by the field name of Smith. He took two to the shoulder, but he’ll live.”

“Ah, that’s good to hear. I know which one you mean. He’s not a bad sort; generally brings things back in a useable state. And he doesn’t pester us too much.”

“It sounds to me as if you boffins favour him.”

“Rosa certainly does.”

Rosa squeaked and elbowed Whitby for that. “What? He’s polite and well...well, he isn’t awful to look at either!”

Spence thought of what had been and regretted what had been missed. “I should really crack on. Traffic’s a nightmare.”

Daniel Moxton had been driving for the agency for three years. Strasbourg to London was one of his favourite routes. The average time required for the journey was eight hours and forty three minutes. Moxton made a hobby of improving upon such things, and had managed it in eight hours and seventeen minutes this time. His passengers had not made comment, but one had been unconscious and the other probably ought to have been.

Pembleton had certainly seemed to be impressed; she had even given him a bonus on top of his expected salary. Moxton meant to enjoy himself with the difference. There was an expensive but extremely nice hotel that he knew of, with secure parking for his vehicle. It was also convenient to **unDer**; a nightclub where awkward questions and unwanted advances simply did not occur.

The flat was precisely as it had been when Spence left it last. A pile of clean but un-ironed clothing took up most of the perfectly made up divan in the bedroom, and the potted plants were desiccated. Although clean, it could not be described as neat, and that was fine. Spence did not mind this type of mess; it was oddly comforting. Curling up on the ageing brown sofa was like drawing an invisible barrier against the world.

There was nothing of interest on the television. Spence grumbled about that and flicked idly through the channels in search of a film. A menu from the local Chinese takeaway lay on the coffee table within far too easy reach. There was cheap gin and cheaper baked beans in the kitchen cupboard. It was good to be back. There was nowhere in the wide of the world that could compare to London, and especially not in November. The city and the month were too well matched in temperament - cold and unrelenting; cast out of greyness itself, and full of pigeons.

One of those feathered denizens was perched on the rail of the rusty fire escape. It tilted its head and shifted back just enough to drop its greenish spoor. Somewhere far below, in the alleyway that ought to have been empty by this hour, a man swore. Company had come to call.

Spence sighed and pulled the slim cold of the rifle out from beneath the sofa. “Not enough gin in the world, if you ask me.”

But no one ever did ask, and perhaps that was the reason that the sniper had been looking a little more keenly at the glossy photos in magazines showing villas for sale in Tuscany. Retirement seemed warmer by the day; always assuming that one lived long enough to attempt it. Spence doubted whether Pembleton would approve of making such plans. It wasn't considered appropriate behaviour for people in this profession.

Live fast and hard and always by the edge of your wits. Die as well as you can; just make certain to be discrete when you do.

Eyeing the uninvited guest through the criss-cross of the scope, Spence mused as to whether anyone would miss him. Someone had sent him here, of course, but they would be concerned for his failing and nothing else.

Has the fellow a life outside of this? Will there be a family left with a gap this Christmas? Is there a house somewhere with a loyal dog expecting to be fed and walked as normal?

Hopefully arrangements were in place for any dependent factors. One would expect a professional to understand the risks. It wasn't down to Spence to look after orphans belonging to the enemy. That was the thought that made it possible to squeeze the trigger.

I do hope that the dog doesn't starve.

He was below average height and thin; that made cleaning up a good deal simpler. Spence dug out the bullet from the crumbling brick where it had settled. Through and through; one shot via the left eye. The still hot lump of misshapen former ammunition joined its casing in Spence's aftercare satchel. The body went into the usual plastic sheet and then into the boot of the failed assassin's own car. It was a short drive to the Thames, followed by a longer drive to headquarters to report the issue.

Craig Campbell blinked as far clear of the better than morphine induced haze as he was able. The yellow glare of the overhead lights hurt his eyes and his throat was scratchy. The medical bay smelt of disinfectant and old pain. He didn't want to be here; he hated this sort of place.

Pembleton knows that by now.

Shuddering fully aware, Campbell was on his feet and halfway dressed by the time that the medical staff arrived to check on him. A stern look was far from being enough to dissuade their attempts at keeping him there. Indeed the nurses appeared more than prepared to argue the point. They had their orders and those orders were that he was to remain overnight for observation.

Such was their determination that he might have submitted to being kept in, had they not attempted to forcibly sedate him. In his defence, Campbell's horror of being drugged was no secret: it was clearly noted in his file. The unpleasant situation that had occurred in Malaga was the root of it; his training coupled with a lack of any post traumatic event support had done the rest. Suffice to tell that grappling with Campbell whilst holding a needle was only ever going to have one very unpleasant result.

There had been a small amount of paperwork to be filed. More crucial was the going over of the man's belongings: his clothing, car and personal effects. He had been carrying an assortment of the

usual tools of their trade. Whitby found his name and everything else that was available via the Internet within thirty minutes. Rosa frowned at the lack of a body. She always did; the technician was human enough to believe that everyone deserved a grave.

Spence made an effort to ease her conscience. “It was clean; he didn’t know a thing.”

“It still feels wrong somehow.”

“That’s why you’re in here and I’m not.”

Killers did not belong in this warm, clean burrow. Kellie Rosa and Nathaniel Whitby were part of a different edge to the game. Spence did know their names and would miss them if the worst happened. It was easier to be remote from the field operatives because one had to be. Boffins inspired too much of a connection to enable one to keep a safe distance.

Pembleton would regularly observe that they were simultaneously the heart of the agency and the bullet that could stop it cold. As such, they were dualistically sacrosanct – prized beyond measure and permitted no misdeed. *Traitors have a special place in Hell; traitor boffins even more so.*

Rosa was not a traitor, but she was softer than Whitby, and Spence knew that those in charge kept a closer watch on her because of this. They trusted the woman implicitly. They also understood how readily their enemies would take her to pieces, should she ever be taken alive. It was an unspoken necessity that boffins could not be risked. Death before the risk of breaking; there were procedures in place to ensure this occurred.

Spence watched the technicians pulling information out of the digital ether for a few more minutes, before turning quietly and heading to medical. It had been a long two decades since their falling out. The operative who went by the field name of Smith wasn’t that hope heavy boy anymore, so maybe, just maybe they could finish that conversation on a better note than they had last time around.

The situation within medical bleached any risk of such a peaceful reunion instantly. There were four nurses slumped on the pale green tiles. They wouldn’t be getting up again. Behind them, the first bed had been overturned; the monitor smashed and the drip – inventive. Operatives were always inventive. Spence followed the only possible route for Smith to have taken – there had been no sign of him on the way here, so he must have headed down towards the mortuary. There was a fire escape there, as well as a garage exit used by the ambulances and hearses that came and went as required.

Predictably the operative hadn’t gotten far before his injuries and the better than morphine that remained in his system had outweighed the adrenaline rush. He lay curled in the first turn of the stairwell and growled when Spence approached him. “Let me alone, damn you!”

“I didn’t bloody glue you back together in Strasbourg so that you could die here in London, you pillock.”

He blinked and finally registered who had found him. “Housekeeping...what, are you here to mop me up?”

“Mop up after you would be more like it. There are four very non operational nurses back there, Mr Smith.”

“I don’t like needles.”

And that was that; it was all that needed to be said. One did not push an operative on their hard limits and expect to live. Spence texted Pembleton with the shape of the matter and knew that it was already closed. “Incidents like this are behind our medical staff insisting on operating using those blasted shells, you know. Maybe if field operatives could be less violent, then we could have actual human beings treating us again.”

“Would that improve their bedside manner?”

“Probably not, I expect.”

“Then we’d just have dead people instead of dead shells, wouldn’t we, Housekeeping?”

“Yes; that’s why our operatives would have to be less violent, Mr Smith.”

He grunted and allowed himself to be examined where he lay. The wound had not reopened at least.

“My name isn’t Smith.”

“I know that, Craig.”

“You looked up my file then? I suppose Pembleton sent you to find me once they realised I wasn’t in medical.”

“You’re still capable of drawing logical conclusions from evidence presented to you then. Good; you’re probably not suffering from brain damage.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a doctor.”

“Don’t purr at me, Campbell; I’ll neuter you.”

“That’s blunt.”

“I assure you that it would be keenly sharp.”

Campbell chuckled as he regained his feet and followed Spence docilely towards the garage exit.

“Where are we going now? Firing squad at dawn?”

“Pizza and possibly also a kebab at mine – someone has to make sure you don’t manage to die from your injuries. It appears that task has fallen to me.”

“Does that mean you’ll tell me your name, Housekeeping?” There was too little menace for it to be anything beyond polite conversation.

“It means that I’m buying you a cheap takeaway and allowing you to have the guest bed temporarily.”

“I like anchovies.” He almost sounded hopeful now.

“Now I know who buys them.”

“Lots of people like anchovies!”

“Most people try them once and regret it deeply.”

“You sound like someone I used to know.”

“For a spy, you’re not very adept at keeping things to yourself, Mr Campbell.”

“I trust you.”

“Just as well I’m not out to murder you then.”

The resultant smirk was worth the inevitable attempt at innuendo. “A man might die in your arms happily enough, Housekeeping.”

“He’d be a happy eunuch before he finished breathing.”

“You’ve made that threat already.”

“I can’t be bothered extrapolating on my put downs until I’ve eaten something.”

“I don’t think I’ll risk that particular opening.”

“No openings for you.”

“Oh, you’re very good at this!”

“Years of practise.”

“Not one of Whitby’s killer robots then?”

“If you’re hoping that I might be programmed not to murder you, you’ll be sadly disappointed.”

He was breathing normally again; the tension had left him. A hint of a smile had returned to his eyes.

“Stuffed crust sound reasonable to you?”

“Somehow I’m unsurprised that you like that sort of thing.”

“Do you mean the cheese or the sausages?”

“You strike me as an all or nothing type of fellow.”

“And you strike me as having read around my file.”

“It’s important to research one’s subject fully. Additional reading is to be recommended.”

“Mmn-hmm – ask any good teacher, eh?”

“Spoken like an experienced student.”

“You really will kill me, Housekeeping.”

“Only if you need to be killed, Mr Campbell.”

Chapter Three – Too Many To List

Campbell was a difficult guest. He was no less tactile now than he had been when they were teenagers, and this became readily apparent. The operative was incapable of merely conversing: his long fingers were perpetually exploring the surfaces around him. Tapping and gliding over the arm of the sofa to his left; curling into the soft pile of the throw to his right. Spence knew that given even the slightest hint of permission the boundary line between furniture and host would be forgotten.

It was a tempting notion but not a sensible one. Campbell needed boundaries; the chaos that was his reality depended upon those around him keeping it firmly in check. And he was reeling still from the stress of the mission in Strasbourg; coupled with whatever ghosts medical had inadvertently awoken. The boy whom Spence remembered was buried under a career’s worth of trauma and misplaced guilt: accepting the man’s advances would be cruel. Spence was many things, but cruel was not one of them, and neither was stupid.

That was why, forty five minutes into Campbell’s stay, his host was already making alternative plans for the weekend. “I’m going out for a bit. You know where all the necessaries are, Mr Campbell. Make yourself at home.”

“Don’t suppose I could tag along then, Housekeeping?”

“You need rest. Get better and perhaps we’ll discuss it.”

His smile was less hopeless now. “I may hold you to that.”

I may want you to. That was what drove Spence out and along the rain blurred streets to bury any risk of what might have happened under a haze of alcohol and overly loud music. *I may want a lot of things that I can’t have.*

Whitby had lost track of time again. He was up to his elbows amidst circuitry when the outer doors to his workshop slid open and Rosa peeked in. “I’m just heading home; thought I’d best check in with you first.”

He grunted and bent closer to the machine that he was repairing. “Trying to make certain that I bother sleeping?”

“I’m happy as long as you pop up for air occasionally.” She smiled fondly at him, but only the security cameras observed it. “See you tomorrow, Whitby.”

“Bring the coffee.” It wasn’t the politest of goodbyes. Still his fellow boffin would understand. She was the best in his department; possibly the world. Whitby was glad to have her on the team. *Bloody shame the others don’t have her talent, or her enthusiasm. Must call her later and make sure she got home safely.*

Rosa hummed as she walked. The half mile to the tube station made for a healthy way to finish her shift. She much preferred it to the gym. The familiar press of other late commuters cradled her as she boarded the train. There was nowhere left in the carriage to sit, but Rosa mistrusted the cleanliness of the seats anyhow. Even the floor was a little tacky beneath her shoes. *I’m taking a taxi in tomorrow morning.*

Moxton recognised the thin figure perched at the bar as soon as he entered **unDer**. He wasn’t especially surprised that this would be their sort of scene. One gained a knack for reading others after a while. The practical black twill trousers and unisex blazer could only hide so much.

“Good evening, Spence.”

“Mr Moxton.”

“You’re troubled.”

“And you’re observant.”

“Who is it that you’re trying not to catch?”

“An old flame that never really did light fully; he turned up unexpectedly and made me realise how stupid I used to be.”

“Huh.”

They paused for a while and ignored the rest of the world. Moxton sipped appreciatively at his scotch, whilst Spence toyed with the tiny paper umbrella in the cocktail that clearly wasn’t going to be imbibed. The cocktail was a suspiciously vivid shade of blue; the umbrella pink, with a yellow edge.

The driver set down his glass. “Those things tend to have more effect if you actually drink them.”

“That’s why I’m not.”

“Hmm-mmm, so you aren’t going to fuck him tonight.”

“It wouldn’t be right.”

“And you don’t do wrong.”

“Do you?”

He met the ice blue gaze readily; his own dark brown eyes mirroring the challenge set to him. “I won’t take you apart just so that you can avoid thinking about your problems.”

“Then why are we even talking?”

Moxton’s broad shoulders rippled beneath the crisp white linen of his shirt as he reached across and cupped Spence by the chin. “What are your limits?”

“I have too many to list.”

Moxton exhaled slowly and shifted his hand; gliding down the side of Spence’s neck and coming to rest on one narrow shoulder. “It’s like that then.”

“Yes it is.”

He squeezed just hard enough for it to approach discomfort. An involuntary shudder drained a little of the tension from the slight body that was now pressing backward to seek his grip. “You don’t get out much.”

“I’m a very busy person, Mr Moxton.”

“It goes with the job.”

“You ought to know; I expect you cover as many miles as I do, if not more.”

“I like to travel.” He squeezed again and felt Spence melting. “See the world; meet new people, that sort of thing.”

“I suppose you’re in the perfect job then.”

“It’s not dissatisfying.”

The pizza had been a good choice. His stomach was contented and dragging his thoughts towards an attempt at sleeping. Campbell yawned and ignored it. Instead he padded to the impressively spacious shower room; shedding his clothing as he went. The water was hot enough to shift the final vestiges of Malaga out of his bones for now at least as the steam embraced his battered form. *Strasbourg was a dream by comparison.*

Who was he staying with anyhow? He still hadn’t gleaned that: no name, no clues at all. The flat was bereft of any personal effects. There wasn’t even a hint of who his host actually was. No utility bills or letters to be found; no photographs, not even a bloody address book by the telephone. The bookshelves were too eclectically stocked to be analysed. *Clearly Housekeeping knows the game well.*

Campbell was impressed: most within the agency had at least some tendency to play at normality. Four handguns and sixteen bladed weapons had emerged so far in his methodical search for information. The medicine cabinet proved unhelpful – being too well stocked to belong to any one

person. *Something for everyone in here; presumably Housekeeping has plenty of guests. Or else this is a safe house.*

He resorted to examining their clothes. There were dozens of outfits that might have been for anyone at all: nondescript and utterly androgynous, right down to the unisex styled undergarments. The latter were hideously practical, almost sportswear, and nothing at all like the stuff his companions generally favoured.

Perhaps they really are just another bloody machine. It wasn't impossible; Whitby had grumbled often enough of making something to keep an eye on the field operatives. Still, Campbell couldn't shake the notion that there was something familiar about them. It was somehow both comforting and unsettling. *I like them.* He nodded to himself and smiled again. *I think perhaps they like me too. Either that or Pembleton is afraid to leave me unsupervised in London.*

Realising that he was indeed unsupervised currently, and very much alone, Campbell stopped smiling. He didn't enjoy solitude. The memories were better able to creep up on him, and by this stage he was far outnumbered by them. Alcohol helped to drown out the worst of them, so he gave up on playing detective and opened the gin. With a bit of luck the television would help too.

It wasn't anything beyond letting go: a sweaty coil of two people desperately in need of winding down. Sex would have removed something far too vital from the equation. Both Moxton and Spence had understood this perfectly even before they began stripping one another. Now, in the afterglow of their grappling match, they simply breathed.

"You should get out more."

"I told you; I'm very busy."

Moxton glared. "Get out more, Spence."

"You're not in charge of me, Mr Moxton. This was just something we both needed; nothing more."

"It wasn't an order; it was a piece of friendly advice."

"We both know I can't follow it."

"More like you won't."

Spence rolled over and stared up at the canopy of the bed. "You were right: this is a very nice hotel indeed."

"Changing the subject doesn't mean that I'm wrong."

"And being right doesn't mean that you can fix me."

"Maybe I just like being right." The driver sighed and dragged his palms over his face. "Do you want a drink?"

"Gin, please. No ice."

They drank in silence and then took turns to shower and redress. When Moxton emerged from the en-suite, Spence had already gone. *Don't leave it so long next time, Housekeeping.*

Campbell blinked awake as the door opened. "Did you have a nice evening, Housekeeping?"

“Why are you sleeping on the sofa, Mr Campbell?”

“I dozed off watching something – not really sure what it was about to be honest. Some sort of comedy, I think.”

“I’d send you to bed but it’s almost morning.”

“And I recall you saying that I’m on sick leave or some such nonsense. We could stay in bed all weekend - if we wanted to.”

“You’re not royalty, Mr Campbell. Stop speaking of yourself as though you were.”

He chuckled and stretched out further. “Hospitality clearly isn’t your forte, Housekeeping.”

Spence eyed the empty bottle on the floor and switched off the television. “Put some clothes on, you pillock.”

“I’m not sure where I left them.”

“Trust me; you can’t miss them. There’s a trail of unwashed garments from here to the shower.”

“I wanted to freshen up.”

“Well now you need to sober up.”

“Coffee would help with that.”

“You’re an utterly insufferable bastard.”

“I’m starting to think that you don’t like me.” Campbell exaggerated a pout as he finally went in search of his discarded clothing. “I just can’t think as to why.”

“It’s all the trace materials you’ve been shedding around my home. I expect I’ll need to fumigate once you leave.”

“Hadn’t taken you to be so very OCD, Housekeeping.”

“People aren’t OCD; it’s something that one has, not that one is.”

“Pedant.”

“I’ll have you know that this pedant has a rifle and permission to use it.”

He fastened his belt. “Well, how about if I make us that coffee?”

“Does the coffee involve biscuits?”

A memory from well over twenty years ago stabbed Campbell hard at that phrase. He stared intently at the slight figure perched on the arm of the sofa. “It could do.”

“What sort of biscuits?”

“Copious.”

The smile was still as enigmatic as he remembered, but possibly twice as dazzling. “Those always were my favourite.”

“Dear Jesus, it *is* you! Spence - where have you been for all of these years?” He closed the distance between them in under three paces and reached forwards instinctively.

Spence held him at arms' length. "No hugging, thank you, you know that."

Campbell bent his head and rested his brow against the slightly too closely cropped pale hair. "But I've missed you! And you haven't answered me – where have you been hiding? Why didn't you ever call?"

"Why didn't you?"

"Well, chiefly because you told me to fuck off and die."

"Oh yes, that. Sorry."

He laughed despite the stupid waste of years, or more probably because of them. "I can't believe I didn't recognise you! Although you do look different now; what possessed you to chop off all your hair?"

Spence shrugged and let go of Campbell's shoulders to stroke his head. "It's practical; less of me to grab hold of in a fight."

"There's little enough of you already, you little canary!"

"Flattery still isn't chief amongst your talents then?"

"Stop sniping at us, Spence. Be nice for once."

"I am being nice, Campbell." The sniper leant backwards to evade his nuzzling. "Quit that! Honestly, it's like being friends with a giant cat sometimes."

Ouch. "Friend zoned again then, eh?"

"Always the bridesmaid, darling, and so forth – anyhow, what happened to you making us both coffee and biscuits?"

The operative grumbled but took the hint. "So how long have you been working for the agency?"

"Pembleton recruited me straight out of university, much like you yourself. Of course, I get paid a good deal less. You field operatives are very expensive creatures to maintain."

"You do get what you pay for."

"By that logic, Pembleton ought to have sole possession of the world's most extensive selection of vastly overpriced alcoholic beverages."

"She does; they're safely contained in our assorted livers."

Spence snorted and handed him the milk. "No wonder she keeps muttering about having your guts as garters!"

"I console myself with the fact that recycling a living operative is generally frowned upon."

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